

# ‘One of the best investments’: why going to uni is still worth it

By Iain Gillespie

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A six-part series helping students navigate the rewards and challenges of university life.  
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Thousands of school leavers are facing a momentous decision as they prepare to launch themselves into a rapidly changing and uncertain world: “Should I keep studying, and is going to university still worth it?”

Recruitment agencies, career counsellors, academic researchers and the universities themselves all answer with a resounding “Yes”, but their advice carries some caveats.

“When we advise young people to go to university, there’s much more involved in unpacking that decision than just one key piece of information,” says Penne Dawe, CEO of the Australian Centre for Career Education.

“It’s become more and more complicated because there are so many factors involved. It takes into account not only their values, but also how they want to work, how often they want to work and how will they navigate having a family? It’s a really big decision.

“Some kids have known all their life what they want to do, but others just have no idea and are really struggling.

Picking something suddenly is not the right thing to do; it really needs to be worked through.



Penne Dawe, CEO of the Australian Centre for Career Education

“Going to a career counsellor, particularly while you’re still at school, is really, really important. They are professionals who understand the labour market and have all the information that can help young people navigate different pathway options.”

Luke Sheehy, CEO of Universities Australia, the peak representative body for the sector, has no doubts about the advantages of a university education.

“University study is one of the best investments school leavers can make,” he says.

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“It puts an average extra \$1 million in your pocket over your working life.”

Australian university graduates are landing full-time jobs at record levels, with employment rates for new graduates reaching 79 per cent in 2023 – the highest since 2016.

Salaries are also rising, with a median starting salary of \$71,000 per year for undergraduates in 2023, a 4.4 per cent increase on 2022.

“University graduates earn significantly more over their lifetime, securing a lasting financial advantage.”

Sheehy says 90 per cent of new jobs over the next 10 years will require a post-secondary education, with about half of them needing a university degree.

“Studying at university equips students with skills that extend well beyond the classroom,” he says.



Luke Sheehy, CEO of Universities Australia.

“These include critical thinking, problem solving, time management, writing, communication and teamwork.”

The cost of a university qualification and the debt that needs to be paid off after gaining one is a critical issue for most young people, and Sheehy offers reassurance on the question of affordability.

“On average, the government covers around half the cost of a university degree,” he says.

“Students pick up the rest of the cost, often through the higher education loan program (HELP), which is a game-changer for students in Australia, meaning they don’t have to pay for university fees upfront.

“Repayments only kick in once graduates are earning above a certain income threshold, so they only pay back their loan when they’re financially ready.”

Associate Professor Peter Hurley, director of the Mitchell Institute, a leading research think tank on education embedded in Victoria University, describes what he calls a “mass-ified” system created by the large number of young people obtaining university degrees.

“It’s a long-term phenomenon where there’s been a big increase in the number of school leavers in particular going to university,” he says.

“That has a lot of benefits, but also a series of problems.

“As you get more and more people with university qualifications, you have to get higher levels of attainment to get the reward. So, what you overall might’ve got when you did a bachelor’s degree, you now also need to do a postgraduate degree.



Associate Professor Peter Hurley, director of the Mitchell Institute.

“A university degree doesn’t necessarily buy what it used to, but having said that, it’s still better than the alternative.

“When you look at it, there are between 800 and 900 classifications of jobs and about 200 to 300 of those are aligned to a university degree, and, absolutely, they’re the ones where there’s going to be a lot of growth.”

Serena Skelly, operations director for Evolve Scientific, a leading recruitment agency specialising in the scientific sector, says a higher education degree provides increased access to job opportunities in almost any field of employment.

“Without a degree, it can be more challenging to find high-paying job opportunities, and competition for available positions may be fierce,” she says.

“Even when jobs don’t require a university degree, some employers prefer hiring candidates who have one.

“In addition to gaining in-depth knowledge in a specific field, a degree is a starting point for some high-status professions such as engineer, physicist, doctor, therapist, finance manager or other related occupation.

“These professions require candidates to have a unique and wide set of skills and expertise that you can’t always learn on the job, but will acquire with a degree.”